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# Beauty, Bodies, and Elites

Anne Monier and Ashley Mears

## 1 Introduction

This chapter considers the form and function of physical appearances at the top of the class hierarchy, among elites. We begin with the observation that bodies are class coded (Bourdieu, 1984). Bodies exude class differences in their habits, manners, adornment, shape, shade, and tone, such that the body is a clear site of class differentiation (Vandebroek, 2016). However, class differentiation is not a gender neutral phenomenon, as women and men occupy different positions of power in capitalist society. Women more readily accumulate and deploy aesthetic and symbolic capital, and men more closely control material and financial capital (Collins, 1992). Beauty and appearances function as women's resources, but empowerment from beauty has clear limits (see Craig, this volume).

We apply these insights to study elites. Appearances play an outsized role in signifying elite status, and women's appearances in particular are stylized and staged to indicate wealth. Yet while beautiful women command attention and generate

symbolic value, their considerable efforts ultimately yield profits to men who control a disproportionate share of material capital. We managed to get inside elite social spaces for ethnographic observations by taking on roles as women in two paradigmatic cases—philanthropy galas and VIP nightclubs. Through ethnography and interviews, we observed how women's bodies signify wealth in elite spaces and how this perpetuates gender inequality, since men hold and direct more material capital, and women's bodily rituals and displays ultimately further men's projects of status distinctions. Women's beauty work and display convert men's wealth into symbolic capital which can be reconverted into yet more of men's capital. Hence, among the most privileged women, beauty requires extensive investment but yields a subordinated capital, a fragile asset with weak fungibility, the pursuit of which perpetuates structural inequalities *between* men and women and *among* women of different class positions.

The gendered limitations of beauty are apparent up and down the class hierarchy (Skeggs, 2004). Our focus on studying elites gives us several advantages. "Studying up" brings gender and appearance into focus, both because of the centrality of appearance for women as opposed to men, and because of the importance of women in cultivating cultural tastes and upholding the status and interest of their families. Women must keep up appearances among the elite in particular, where appearances are pressurized under greater display and scrutiny (Elias, 1983; Sherman, 2017).

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Furthermore, gender and appearance dynamics among the rich may differ from other classed cultures, because the stakes are potentially higher in terms of the rewards and social costs of violating social expectations, in our case, expectations of beauty and luxury.

In the following pages, we first develop our line of thinking from two main bodies of literature. We build first upon theories of elite hierarchies via Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu which have largely overlooked gender. Second, we build on theories of gender and elites, which mostly lack ethnographic grounding. Physical appearance and beauty play an important role across these two literatures, which we advance with our investigation on the role of beauty in gendered elite hierarchies.

Before proceeding, let us first clarify what we mean by “elite,” which is a difficult category to define given diversity among elites (Cousin et al., 2018). In this particular context, we think of elites as those who have vastly more economic resources than the rest of the world. In this way, we are closer in thinking to someone like Mike Savage (2014), who foregrounds the material wealth of elites, rather than Max Weber who foregrounds status and prestige as the defining traits of the elite.

Second, let us untangle how we see the concepts of beauty, appearance, aesthetics, and display, and how this set of concepts relate to the elite. We think of beauty as a strong and positive assessment of persons’ appearance, while aesthetics is the overall affect or “vibe” of persons, spaces, and experiences. Display is the act of showing beauty and/or aesthetics. In our analysis, beauty is fundamentally a social system of hierarchy (as is ugliness). Among the elite, it is not enough for one to be beautiful, but to be seen, and recognized as beautiful, and by appropriate audiences, in order to confer status. Elites give us a special window to peer into how beauty operates as a hierarchy, with penalties and rewards, because elites go to great lengths to display themselves to each other, especially at the settings we accessed. Elite social spaces let us see how beauty works, in particular how it works differently for women and for men, who are much less on display.

## 2 Literature: Theories of Elites, Gender, Bodies

### 2.1 Embodied Hierarchies

Bodies can denote social position. In Norbert Elias’ model of the civilizing process, as societies become increasingly complex, individuals become more interconnected, and so people internalize tighter social constraints on their bodies. Manners and other norms of etiquette flourish via self-regulation (1978). A key place for the dissemination of codes of etiquette was the court aristocracy. Courtiers had to regulate their conduct to maintain favor with the king and survive the status competition of court (Elias, 1983 [1969]). As Elias writes:

To keep one’s place in the intense competition for importance at court, to avoid being exposed to scorn, contempt, loss of prestige, one must subordinate one’s appearance and gestures, in short oneself, to the fluctuating norms of court society that increasingly emphasize the difference, and the distinction, of the people belonging to it. (Elias, 1983 [1969], pp. 231–232)

Elias’ thesis powerfully situates human physiological response within social figurations, and it holds unexplored insights for an anthropology of the body in social hierarchies. In particular, how bodies must be carefully controlled to both give off the right social cues and as a matter of what feels right: as Elias shows, rules on the body are social constructs, but they come to feel like second nature.

Like Elias, Pierre Bourdieu attended to comportment of the body—in fact both he and Elias used the term *habitus* to describe how social habits come to reside in the body (Bourdieu, 1977; Elias, 1983 [1969]). In Bourdieu’s words, the “differences in the way of carrying the body, of carrying oneself, of behaving” expresses a person’s relation to the social world (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 51, translation by authors).

Both frameworks by Elias and Bourdieu hold insights for an understanding of contemporary elite embodiment and behaviors. We take inspiration from Elias to trace how status among elites is constituted in subtle embodied displays, and careful control of the body. And while *habitus* is

well developed in studies of cultural stratification among the poor, we join the growing corpus of ethnographic studies interrogating *elite* habitus on the ground (e.g., Khan, 2011). From these literatures, we develop the question: how is an elite habitus displayed today?

## 2.2 Theorizing Gender Among the Elite

Gender is a fundamental part of elite sociality. Few classical treatments of elites have attended to gender; for instance, Elias' omission of gender has been critiqued (e.g., Hargreaves, 2010) (but see Chap. 1 of *The Court Society*). Given the overtly masculine domination of economic and political elites, it is surely an apt site for the study of gender (Cousin et al., 2018).

As such, a relatively new body of work on elite women and gender dynamics in elite families is growing rapidly (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2021; Sherman, 2017; Yavorsky et al., 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Management and organization scholars focus on women in elite positions (Moore, 1988; Megan Tobias Neely), on elite careers for women (Coltrane, 2004; O'Neil et al., 2008), women elite athletes (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009), women on corporate boards (Benton, 2021; Heemskerk & Fennema, 2014), identity performances for elite women (Heizmann & Liu, 2020), and also on upper-class women (Ostrander, 1984). Since marriage is common among the elite, women play crucial roles in elite households (Glucksberg, 2018; Sherman, 2017; Yavorsky et al., 2019), as arbiters of taste and consumers (Sherman, 2017) and managers of the household servants (Delpierre, 2022).

These roles position elite women far above most other women and men, yet still subordinate to elite men. Structurally, this appears in demographic studies confirming women who marry into upper-class families have thin claims to material resources in the event of divorce (Bessi ere & Gollac, 2020). In Ostrander's classic 1984 work, *Women of the Upper Class*, women remain subordinate to their husbands even in their extensive women's philanthropic work which assists in

the perpetuation of their class (see also Daniels, 1988). Yet, Ostrander's study was conducted almost forty years ago, and in those decades, there have been powerful shifts in the occupational, political, and social roles of women raising the possibility of significant change. More recently, Cooper's (2014) ethnographic study of families in the Silicon Valley highlights how women actually had more responsibility and control over economic resources in the working-class families, but as families became wealthier, men become very powerful in managing the economic realm. Yet, her excellent study focused on families across the income distribution rather than on wealthy families per se. We take inspiration from these literatures on gender and the elite to consider how women's beauty figures into both their privilege and their precarious hold on capital within the upper classes.

## 2.3 Embodied Gendered Distinctions

Given the twin facts of gender dynamics and the signification of bodies among the elite, we now consider the role of the body at the intersection of gender and the elite.

Plenty of literature describes the greater pressure on women regarding their appearance, particularly middle-class and white women, who face the highest rates of eating disorders, as well as looks penalties in labor and romantic markets. Investment in and control of the body might be women's economic and social mobility strategy (McLaren & Kuh, 2004). Thinness has become a marker of social distinction in industrialized society (Bordo, 1993), which makes it more likely to be valued by individuals higher on the socio-economic spectrum. Vandebroek (2015) finds that the size of women's bodies gets slenderer as they move up the class ladder. Men have more leeway in range of acceptable bodies, while women's status is tied to their bodies and how they look. In general, research has demonstrated that for a given body size, socio-economically advantaged women are more dissatisfied with

or concerned about their bodies than socio-economically disadvantaged women (Ogden & Thomas, 1999; Wardle & Griffith, 2001).

For our purposes, we conceptualize the importance of embodied gendered display among elite in the two following ways:

The first way to usefully think about gendered embodiment and elites is to consider beauty as attention. In *Celebrity Society*, van Krieken (2018) outlines the importance of attention to establishing status among elites, such as entertainment elite. Women can attract and focus attention and thus, they may help to position men's status. Beautiful women like fashion models and highly-attractive people generally motivate increased attention (Lorenzo et al., 2010). These gendered status dynamics are more subtle than Eliasian forms of status competition and arguably more applicable to contemporary status hierarchies since the King's court is no longer confined to the walls of a palace.

Furthermore, elites are attuned to specific codes of beauty that others may not recognize, because any attentional subculture notices specific and small things that outsiders may miss. In Eviatar Zerubavel's work, the concept of "attentional subcultures" refers to how different groups or communities, whether based on profession, culture, or ideology, develop specific norms and practices around what is noticed, ignored, or regarded as important. Attentional subcultures shape how individuals within these groups focus their attention, essentially determining what they "see" or ignore in the world around them in patterned ways. For example, make-up artists see skin, dentists see teeth, and academics see citations and acknowledgments. Among the elites, plenty of ethnographic examples abound of the subtle and highly communicative power of, say, cuff links or the minutia of girls' school uniforms at private boarding schools (Beatrix, 1988; Khan, 2011).

The second lens is broader and illustrates the difference between class and status. Men are to class, as women are to status, quipped Randall Collins, as he reflected on how women and men are differently located in the class structure (1992). Men, historically *de jure* and de

facto, have greater access to financial and material capital, as owners and producers of land, machines, and corporations. Women, meanwhile, have more highly valued stores of aesthetic and cultural capital, reigning over and producing status cultures. Women's subordinate class positions (as order takers, usually not the order givers) are peppered over by status displays in the form of good-looking homes, children, and communities, the result of what Collins calls "Goffmanian labor."

In this lens, men hold disproportionate control over material resources which women convert into symbolic capital. Feminist Bourdieusians have produced a wealth of studies documenting how femininity is a resource, a kind of "sign bearing capital," that men can use (Skeggs, 2004), and a "repository" of value that can generate social capital and status for men (McNay, 2002, p. 142). Ethnographically, scholars have been documenting cases of women's symbolic value relative to men's material power. Analyses of sex work likewise document the crucial role of women's bodies in forging men's business networks. Among hostess clubs in Vietnam, women's sexualized bodies play a main role in forging men's identities and business ties (Hoang, 2015). Likewise, Allison's ethnography of Japanese hostess clubs shows how women exchange sexual capital to men, which upholds a system of male-controlled capitalism in Japan (1994). In Greek college life, fraternities gain status from women's bodily capital, typified by "the blonde" who circulates without pay through frat parties (Hamilton, 2007). Similarly, night-clubs amass women's "bodily capital" to attract men with money (Grazian, 2009; Rivera, 2010). Beyond its personal advantages, bodily capital holds value for people and organizations able to harness it, whether by wages or other means.

Throughout this literature, women's bodies in particular, not men's, do the work of communicating symbolic value. Anthropologists have long noted that women are imagined to be more "in the body" than men; that is, they are more associated with bodily functions such as reproduction, while men are imagined as rooted in the mind (Ortner, 1974). This is also a disadvantage for women

in male-dominated spaces, for instance, as business leaders, women must manage their bodies to produce respectable business femininity (Mavin et al., 2016).

The anthropologist David Graeber, in *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*, also addressed the question of gender in the role of women's dress in signaling value:

It is easy to see how dress codes reinforce this. Formal male dress is designed to hide the body. Its sobriety seems intended to efface not only a man's physical form but his very individuality, rendering him abstract and, in a certain sense, invisible. Clothing for women, on the other hand, not only reveals more of the body (or at least hints at revealing it): it transforms what is revealed into one of a collection of objects of adornment—body parts becoming equivalent, as such, to clothing, makeup, and jewelry—that together define the wearer as a sight, and by extension, as relatively concrete and material. Now, as a critique of gender relations, this analysis applies only to Western society—and relatively recent Western society at that. But the basic division between a relatively invisible self-acting on the outside world and a concrete and visible one relating primarily to itself is, I think, of much wider significance. It may very well be intrinsic to the dynamics of human thought and action themselves.

The nineteenth-century economist Thorsten Veblen, in his satire among the *nouveaux riches*, described women as vicarious consumers for men's economic achievements (2009 [1899]). Veblen claimed that women function as a “trophy” for men to prove their financial power. Having an unproductive wife, whose dress and body signifies her leisurely life, is a mark of a successful man.

While these theories of elites note that women's bodies signify men's elite status, rarely are these theories grounded in empirical observation. There are exceptions. Based on interviews with wealthy Londoners, Luna Glucksberg shows the important role of women's unpaid labor—emotional, embodied, and largely invisible and discounted—in reproducing wealth which is largely concentrated among married men (2018). Rachel Sherman too has shown how women's household consumption furthers the classed projects of wealthy New Yorkers (2017). Beatrix Le Wita also examines ethnographically elite practices and behaviors (1988). An earlier

generation of research showed how elite women had main roles in philanthropy and membership on boards of nonprofit organizations, even as they were subservient to their husbands in the family (Ostrander, 1984), a finding more recently echoed by Monier and Mears (2024).

We take inspiration from these studies to frame our own original ethnographies on elite social spaces to which we now turn.

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### 3 Empirical Cases: The Philanthropy Galas and the VIP Party Scene

Taking inspiration from ethnographies of gendered distinction, we attend to two settings of elite social worlds, philanthropy events and VIP parties. We each had access to research ethnographically and with interviews of major actors in each space, in New York and Paris (for Monier studying the American Friends galas) and New York, the Hamptons, Miami, and St. Tropez (for Mears studying promoters and their clients in this global party circuit). Both cases have similar ingredients, but some things are very different. In both of our field sites, the VIP and the galas, it was striking how we both observed the importance of staging aesthetics to display wealth and power: the “visibility” of the symbolic capital is of utmost importance. Both are scenes of leisure but which take a lot of work. They both cater to the display of ostentation and excess consumption of rich people.

The main points of variation are the populations and the legitimacy of the leisure. These are very different populations of elites, with VIP party-goers generally much younger than philanthropy gala attendees, particularly women. Young women aged 18–25 are the norm at VIP clubs, while women are well above 50 in the philanthropy world. These age distinctions correspond to different looks and habits, for instance, at the gala, attendees angle to get their pictures in the newspaper and not on Instagram, the main media for showcasing the VIP party. The VIP club is clearly less socially legitimate than philanthropy, which may be the purest way to covert money into status

(Collins, 1992, p. 226). The VIP club, in contrast, is considered “wasteful,” the hours are much later into the night, and the norms of behavior include getting drunk and dancing on furniture. As such, it is “immature” relative to philanthropy in two senses, age and legitimacy.

Still, we use both cases in conversation to further understand how *women’s* bodies and gendered rules of comportment produce elite hierarchies.

### 3.1 Setting the Gala Scene: The Beauty of Exceptional Experiences

Philanthropy is a way for elites to transform economic capital into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 4). In this sense, the galas, typical moments of the philanthropic journey, offer a “unique experience that you can’t just get with money” (Monier, 2019). Money is thus not enough, and access to what cannot be bought is of great value in the eyes of elite donors (“you know they are very rich people, they can afford everything, but they can’t afford this person’s private collection, or dinner in Pinault’s house”). The distinction is thus access to what is priceless (“It is so priceless”). Patrons give money and receive in exchange invaluable experiences.

A typical night at a gala event will involve long evening at a *château* in France or at a high-end venue in New York, lavishly decorated, where women wear gala gowns and men black tie tuxedos, a speech, a concert or a private tour of the monument, a meal by one of the best chefs in town and many important people (artists, politicians, CEOs, or celebrities).

As a true “representation,” the gala aims, for the American Friends<sup>1</sup> and their donors, to be seen, to “give a show” (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 1996), both to each other and to the outside world.

<sup>1</sup> Monier’s study focuses on the American Friends groups of French cultural institutions (for ex American Friends of the Louvre, American Friends of Versailles, etc.), which are organizations that allow American wealthy donors to make gifts to French institutions while getting tax deductions.

To admire, to see and to be seen: these events are part of the “process of civilization” described by Norbert Elias, in which pleasure is shifted from the sphere of action to that of spectacle (Elias, 1983 [1969]). The ostentatious character of wealth is central here, because “it is not enough to simply possess wealth and power: they must still be brought to light, for it is only through them that esteem will be shown” (Elias, 1983 [1969]). It is therefore a question of leaving “a tangible, visible, ostensible, measurable result” (Veblen, 2009 [1899], p. 35). Symbolic capital, and the distinction it allows, must be visible, and to do this, several means are used.

For the galas, the staging work is carefully prepared in order to offer an aesthetic representation. The beauty is not only the beauty of bodies but also of surroundings—everything must be in harmony. It is a question of aestheticizing the places, by decorating them, in order to offer a true living picture. In addition to the fact that these events take place in cultural institutions that are already of great beauty in themselves (castles, monuments, etc.), the associations will carry out an important metamorphosis to magnify these places. The decoration is thus very elaborate. The aestheticization of every detail is accompanied by a high quality of the elements—fabrics, floral accompaniments, food, lighting. The best craftsmen and artists have been solicited to set up these sumptuous events, which are a true “staging of wealth.” The etiquette is perfectly respected and everything must be harmonious, aesthetic, and in “good taste.” This practice is in line with the aestheticization of the daily life of the elite. This way of decorating and staging is not specific to American Friends groups, but the way of doing it is specific to elite events.

Furthermore, American Friends groups give great importance to the production of images of the beauty of these events. Indeed, the role of appearance leads the American Friends to emphasize visibility: thus, at each event, there is a photo shoot. During the most important events, it is even a photo call. However, pictures are not only taken by professional photographers: sometimes they are also taken by the heads of the organizations or the donors themselves. The guests themselves take

many pictures, even selfies for the younger ones. For example, while visiting an embassy in Paris, from where the Eiffel Tower was visible, everyone was taking pictures of it. These pictures will then be used to promote the organization, in their documents and brochures, but also in the specialized or general press, which they will come to nourish.

Usually, donors want other people to know that they were at this “unique” and “exceptional” event, showing it to the world. Being a donor of the Louvre or the Paris Opera also means claiming and showing it. “Visibility” is thus central.

### 3.2 Setting the VIP Party Scene: Quantity of Quality

Around the world at various times, a certain segment of elites and a curated entourage descend upon party hotspots like St. Tropez and the Hamptons in the summer and St. Barthes in the winter (Cousin & Chauvin, 2012). They attend VIP nightclubs and brunch parties, including “pop up” club franchises from other hotspots, characterized by luxurious settings with famous brands of champagne and vodka, elaborate light and sound systems, famous DJs, and tufted leather banquettes.

Within these sumptuous settings, the bodies of women and men have clearly different aesthetic roles and expectations. Like the gala scene, in the VIP, people are almost entirely White with the exception of servers, and in the clubs, promoters who are disproportionately Black and Latino men. In the VIP scene, there is an abundance of beautiful and young women who look like fashion models: tall, thin, and young (between roughly 18 and 25 years old). From parties in New York, the Hamptons, Miami, and the French Rivera, Mears observed a homogenous look of women, who are called “girls” regardless of their age. So important is the quantity of perceived “quality” of girls that the club scene is sometimes called “Models and bottles,” as club operators assume big spenders will not come to their venues without a clearly visible excess of beautiful women.

Women deemed unattractive by the club managers are excluded from entry at the door

by bouncers and doorpersons, whose explicit mandate is to adhere to exacting beauty standards for women—not for men. One club in NYC instructed its door persons to not let any women inside if she was shorter than the “door girl,” a woman who stood 5’7” in high heels.

Older women are especially invisible and unwelcome in the VIP clubs. Gendered ageism results in sexist assessments that women over the age of 30 are “desperate husband hunting,” and that women “lose their looks” as they age. As an example, one private investor, a wealthy businessman from Europe who spends a lot of time in the global club scene, explained: “Men grow into their looks and peak later in life, for women they fall off around 35 something like that.”

These events are also held in physical spaces which are *extra*-ordinary. High-end nightclubs are often cavernous spaces with high ceilings, high-tech sound and lighting systems, ornate furnishings like velvet tufted couches and chandeliers. Clubs are often located in famous hotels in gentrified parts of cities, such as The Gansevoort in the Meatpacking District, a hotel where rooms went for over \$500 a night. When the entrance to these clubs faces the public sidewalk, the doorways are closed off with velvet ropes maintained by imposing security guards in black suits. The public facade of clubs is often designed with minimalist but chic decor, lighting, and even red carpets on which entrants wait. Inside the clubs, their decor exudes extravagance, with state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems and meticulous attention to furnishings and fixtures. One club had imported mature birch trees and wrought iron patio furniture to give it the feel of an exotic café. Another was furnished with dark suede ceilings and rich amber light, and customers walked through an arched golden tunnel to get inside. It made the club’s entrance feel like a portal to a secret rich world. Club Marquee New York City cost nearly \$3.5 million when it was renovated (Elberse et al., 2009, p. 254). Club Provocateur, in downtown New York, was a \$5 million investment, designed to be the “most luxurious” of VIP clubs in the city (Gray, 2010).

### 3.3 Inequalities: Gendered Conversions of Material to Symbolic Capital

Per Veblen and Bourdieu, women are a part of the conversion of material to symbolic capital, which reproduces a structural inequality between men and women, and among women.

In the VIP, this takes the obfuscated exchange of beautiful women for men's money, a "disreputable trade" akin to sex work which the club elaborately hides (Rossman, 2014). That is, promoters bring beautiful young women to the VIP clubs, where rich men purchase expensive bottles to be in their company, and the promoter, as a broker, takes on any moral opprobrium for facilitating the exchange—indeed many times promoters exclaimed, "I'm not a pimp," as if anticipating the stigma of their trade. The value of women's beauty disproportionately flows to men: "girls" are the conduits through which promoters gain access to wealthy men, how wealthy men enjoy the company of one another, and how the global nightclub industry generates millions in profits a year.

When women attempt to capitalize on their own looks themselves, they are immediately cast in suspicion for "whale hunting," "using," and sex work. Comparative historical cases illuminate this stigma faced by women—typically called "girls"—who used their bodily capital for access to men's resources. Consider the emergence of dating in commercial spaces in the early twentieth-century America: as young unchaperoned women took up men's treats like dinner or theater tickets, they were looked at with some suspicion. Called "charity girls," they were morally distinct from prostitutes because they didn't take money, but subject to critiques of sexual immorality (Peiss, 1986). For instance, in 1913, the vice society of New York City undertook an investigation of a popular working-class nightclub frequented by distinct types of women identified as "near whores" or "whores in the making," distinct from "professional prostitutes" but still compensated for their intimacy (Clement, 2006).

Beauty is thus an asset, exchangeable for some (limited) gains, but to enter such an exchange is

stigmatized. History is full of parallel examples. The early retail "shop girl" in Victorian consumer society was displayed along with merchandise for sale in stores, enticing customers with the suggestion that she herself might be for sale (Sanders, 2006). Chorus girls in fin-de-siècle Europe, young stage performers who danced in unison (such as the "Tiller girls"), were subject to both admiration for their youth and beauty and disdain for their spoiled reputations (Latham, 2000).

Women are the face of a financial operation that serves and is controlled by men, and the value they generate flows to men. As such, beauty is a symbolic resource, one that it is more valuable for men than for women who embody it. And its value is highly gendered; not just in the obvious way that women have more beauty than men, or are considered and appreciated for their beauty more than men—that is well established in literature and in life. But what is striking and novel in our insights here is that the ability to profit from beauty is gendered. If beauty is a capital, it is embodied more by women, and worth more to men than to women. As Chauvin and Jaunait note, asking "Who own my capital?" involves "raising the question of the property of properties, since the holders of a given legitimacy are not automatically its' owners" (2015, p. 67), and suggests the beginnings of a critical theory of ownership in the forms of capital. To do so one must consider the wider field of power that allows any kind of capital to be profitable, in this case, that field is structured by gender and anchored by male hegemony.

While the dynamic of conversion of capital, from material to symbolic, is clear for the philanthropic scene, the gendered aspect is often overlooked. The mechanism is a little bit different from the VIP scene as both capitals (economic and symbolic) are displayed by both genders. The wealthy use charity to claim exemptions from taxes, and to maintain control of land or other valuable assets (Farrell, 2020), but philanthropy also generates a lot of status for men and women. As Marcel Mauss reminds, charity is a gift giving ritual in which gifts not reciprocated yield status to the giver. One of the main differences is that the fortune given is often that of the man (or couple) and the body more shown off is the woman's.

Attending philanthropic galas is a way for elite women to display not only their wealth and status but also their bodies. This differs from the VIP scene where women only display their bodily capital. In the gala scene, if the places are high-end venues, bodies are also shown off. In terms of appearance, most women appear to be cosmetically enhanced to achieve more youthful faces and very thin bodies—which is not the case of men. People, especially women, discuss measures to keep thin, such as what to eat or not what to eat at events like gala dinners and restaurants, where gourmet food is abundant and prepared by top chefs. Not eating dessert, not eating at all, being on a diet, or just eating salad were common practices Monier observed among women.

Women's dress is clearly deliberate and highly decorated: dresses, accessories, fashionable clothing, and high heels. Women in both settings are typically "branded" with specific kinds of clothing and accessories to signal their status. Red-soled Louboutin high heels are a staple in both settings, as are branded handbags like Chanel and Gucci in the VIP scene, at the galas women wear Chanel suits, Lanvin dresses, or Van Cleef & Arpels jewelry—all recognizable to regulars in these worlds. Following what they refer to as the "dress code," women at galas only wear outfits from luxury fashion houses. Some make contracts with luxury companies (e.g., Cartier, Chanel, LVMH) to borrow dresses or perfume to give away in the gift bags for guests. Luxury is everywhere and brands frequently contribute to these exclusive events.

Compared to the VIP scene, attention is less centered on physical beauty than on women's performance of it. As these women were obviously not so thin and not so young, they were expected to maintain the right presentation of self. Considered unacceptable were faux-pas in terms of decoration, like wearing the wrong dress or accessories, or having insufficient make-up or improper behavior. There is also plenty of unwanted attention to women's bodies, such as critical gazes. But like in the VIP scene, men's clothes, bodies, diets, and looks are so infrequently discussed in comparison with women's

and require way less work and investment in time and money (Monier & Mears, 2024).

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## 4 Future Directions and Conclusions

Research on elite hierarchies has often overlooked gender, while studies of gendered elites frequently lack the ethnographic depth needed to analyze embodiment. In this work, we bridge these gaps by integrating two key literatures—attention and status—to better understand the intersection of beauty and inequality.

Our two cases illustrate the gendered limitations of beauty as a resource. In the VIP field, men are particularly adept at converting "girl capital" into economic, symbolic, and social capital, leveraging women's presence to facilitate networking and ascend elite social and business hierarchies. In the philanthropy gala scene, women aid in the "pure" conversion of wealth to status, paying particular attention to looking perfect to create "exceptional" spaces and experiences. Across these settings, women are essential to creating elite environments that enable rich men to stage conspicuous displays of wealth and status. This dynamic can be summed up by Randall Collins's (1992) assertion that "men are to class as women are to status." Men exercise disproportionate control over material resources, while women are often tasked with converting men's class power into symbolic capital. This is especially evident in women's outsized involvement in philanthropy and their contributions to beauty and fashion as forms of symbolic labor.

Yet, women's investments in beauty projects primarily benefit the owners of beauty and fashion industries, generating vastly unequal returns. By centering the role of ownership, scholars can interrogate the systemic inequalities embedded in processes of capital conversion. This approach shifts the focus beyond individual advantages to a broader examination of how power relations shape unequal value extraction from embodied resources.

The double standard of aging works in two very strong ways in these elite spaces. On the one

hand, in the VIP, there is a gender- and age-typical pattern of young beautiful women and older rich men, a gendered formula of embodied and financial equivalencies. As “girls” get older, they lose their value and are no longer welcome to the party. As Susan Sontag put it, “age destroys women” (1972). But in the gala scene, older women still *do beauty*, quite visibly so. Elite women invert Sontag’s adage: these women destroy age. That is, age is something that can and *must* be conquered, by diet, dress, jewels, fitness, injections, and surgery. The “biological clock” of beauty for elite women is extended compared to other less-resourced women, and certainly compared to historical conditions of just 150 years ago, when people aged quickly and women were “old” and out of beauty by age 35 (Kuipers, 2022). Extending the clock of beauty requires strenuous work, time, and of course money, which elite women are expected to expend. And as Monier’s ethnography shows, they police and hold each other to punishing standards for doing beauty well.

Furthermore, our studies suggest the insights men’s beauty might offer into the double standards of aging. For a long time, men have often appeared to grow more attractive as they age, facing few of the penalties or pressures experienced by women in our two field sites. Yet it also seems that in our anti-aging society, pressures from aging are acute for both genders, though they may follow different logics, for instance, with men seeking to portray strength rather than attracting the gaze (Chap. 18). Further studies might consider, what embodied cues do aging men signal in different contexts, and why do these cues function differently than women’s aging bodies? These are fertile questions for the sociology of beauty, particularly as men often remain the invisible or unmarked subjects in ethnographic studies.

Future research should also investigate men and how they use appearance, aesthetically like to exude beauty or strength, cultural capital, or intellect. For instance, in *Distinction*, Bourdieu highlights how men use appearance to occupy space, such as through entourages, oversized clothing (e.g., shoulder pads), and loud or conspicuous behavior. Similarly, Norbert Elias

noted how men in court society adorned themselves with wigs, high heels, powders, a reminder that male beauty is also subject to fashion dynamics. Although the forms of male beautification evolve, the underlying practice persists and remains understudied. Where has men’s beauty gone? It clearly continues to play a role, as evidenced by high-status men leveraging attractiveness for political and social advantages. Understanding men’s investments in beauty, both in elite scenes and broader contexts, is a promising avenue.

We conclude with a truism and its sociological complication. Everyone knows that good looks have value. In both marriage and labor markets, women’s “erotic capital” does yield some personal advantages (Hakim, 2010). However, we complicate this truism: while physical attractiveness often generates rewards, these rewards are not always fully accessible to the individuals themselves. Beauty may yield benefits, but not necessarily to the beautiful ones.

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